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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Monday, June 10, 1935.

Subject: "ANCIENT AND MODERN BREAD." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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News has just reached me of an argument among some of my listeners, and quite a heated argument, too. What do you suppose it was about? No, not the bonus this time, but bread. The man who reported the argument to me happened, on a trip through one of our good southern states, to stop in at a little roadside tea room for a meal. There he overheard the conversation of a group of women at a nearby table. They were discussing the earliest kind of bread. One thought the original bread was sour-dough bread. And another held that it was salt-rising bread. The argument went back and forth and round about without coming to any conclusion, as arguments are likely to do, until finally the sour-dough advocate announced that she would write to Aunt Sammy and have the matter settled. And she did, too. I have the letter, as well as the first-hand report of the man who overheard the conversation. That's why I'm going to talk about ancient and modern breads today.

Though I'm flattered to be appealed to, I'm afraid I'm not equal to settling this matter. In fact, I doubt if anyone alive today knows for sure what the first bread was like. But I will say this: neither side of that argument was right--neither the sour-dough nor the salt-rising advocates. The first bread was made long before these mixtures were ever thought of. It dates way back to the Stone Age at least. We have definite evidences of bread-making in that period. And that was some time ago. Probably the first bread was a very primitive mixture--just wild grains that had been crushed between stones, mixed with water and baked on a hot stone or in hot ashes. Some historians think the first bread was probably made of crushed acorns and beechnuts, as some primitive people are making it today. But bread of the general character we know today--a leavened loaf of grain flour--well, the honors for inventing this modern kind of bread seem to belong to the Egyptians. Cleopatra's cook no doubt was an accomplished breadmaker. For all we know Cleopatra ate bread and jam as she sailed down the Nile. The Egyptians had been making good white bread many centuries before Cleopatra's day. Some people think they learned the art from the Chinese, but nobody seems sure. Anyway, the historians say that from Egypt the knowledge of bread-making traveled to Greece, and that later the Greeks gave the idea to the Romans, and the Romans spread it through the northern countries during their campaigns. Which all goes to show how a good idea can travel once it gets started. By the way, the Greeks did more than giving the idea of bread to the Romans. They helped establish commercial bakeries in Rome. So if Cicero felt hungry for a sandwich of baker's bread before he went to make one of those speeches of his, he lived at a time when he could buy it. From all I read, those Greek bakers could make bread of almost anything; they used wheat, barley, rice, rye, millet and so on, and they combined these flours with dried crushed lotus root or the boiled root of cornflag to give the dough a sweet flavor.

Today in other countries you'll find many kinds of bread that seem curious to us. You'll find both leavened and unleavened bread, made from beans,





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peas, potatoes, chestnuts--the Chestnut bread of the Corsican mountaineers is famous--and bread from acorns, mosses, and starchy roots usually mixed with wheat or rye. Wheat makes the lightest bread because the wheat grain contains gluten which has a little "give" to it, as the bakers say, so holds more gas to make the dough rise.

In the early days of this country, salt-rising bread was the variety of bread most housekeepers made. Some women still make it today. Though it seems like an old-time form of bread, it really is modern, in the light of bread's long history. Now most modern breads, you know, depend on yeast to make the dough rise. But salt-rising bread depends on bacteria for this job. You know, our grandmothers couldn't call up the grocery-man and order a cake of yeast when they wanted to make bread. Yeast preparations weren't being made in this country back in those days. So they left the job of dough-raising to a certain kind of bacteria that they found in cornmeal. They discovered that if they made what they called a "starter"--a warm mixture of scalded milk, cornmeal, sugar and salt--and let this stand in a covered jar six or seven hours until fermentation started and gas was being thrown off, they could add flour to the mixture and go ahead according to the usual steps in bread making.

The chief characteristic in this kind of bread is this--the starter that contains the cornmeal to supply the useful bacteria, and the salt to prevent the growth of undesirable bacteria, gives the name, salt-rising. In this kind of bread, you use a higher temperature for the sponge and dough than you do with yeast bread. Salt-rising bread is never as light as bread raised with yeast; it has a more moist and crumbly texture. Also it has a special flavor all its own. The flavor is one reason many people still make it. Others, I suppose, make it for old time's sake, or for the same reason that early housewives did. And it makes delicious toast.

Now sour-dough bread is a bread where both yeast and bacteria play a part. The sponge is originally made with flour, water and yeast, but it is allowed to stand and ferment for several days until it becomes sour as a result of the growth of acid-forming bacteria. After three days this sour sponge is made up into a dough. You've probably heard of sour-dough bread and biscuits in the northern lumber camps. Today this method of bread-making is rarely used in the United States. But in France, Germany and other countries of Europe it is still popular. The well-known German pumpernickel--the so-called "Black bread" of the German and Russian peasant is a heavy sour-dough mixture made with coarse unbolted rye.

If you have questions about different kinds of home-made bread--old-timers like salt-rising bread, or unusual kinds like soybean bread or dried-fruit bread, or nut-and-cheese bread, you are welcome to write the Bureau of Home Economics at Washington, D. C. for information on them.

